

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

March 17, 2011

OJAI VALLEY TRAIL FISH BARRIER REMOVAL PROJECT

File No. 10-061-01

Project Manager: Bob Thiel

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$215,000 to the County of Ventura to replace a culvert crossing with a bridge along the Ojai Valley Trail at the confluence of San Antonio Creek and the Ventura River in unincorporated Ventura County.

LOCATION: Ventura County, north of the City of Ventura.

PROGRAM CATEGORIES: Resource Enhancement and Integrated Coastal and Marine Resources Protection

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project location

Exhibit 2: County and watershed maps

Exhibit 3: Site map and conceptual bridge design

Exhibit 4: Site photos

Exhibit 5: Mitigated Negative Declaration and Notice of Determination

Exhibit 6: Mitigation monitoring and reporting program

Exhibit 7: Project letters

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31220 and 31251-31270 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed two hundred fifteen thousand dollars (\$215,000) to the County of Ventura to replace a culvert crossing with a bridge along the Ojai Valley Trail at the confluence of San Antonio Creek and the Ventura River in Ventura County. This authorization is subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the commencement of work by the County, the Executive Officer of the Conservancy shall approve in writing a work program, schedule of completion, project budget, and any contractors to be employed on the project.
2. Prior to the disbursement of any funds by the Conservancy, the County shall provide evidence to the Conservancy's Executive Officer that:
 - A. The County has obtained all necessary permits, as well as rights to the entire project site to allow construction, maintenance and monitoring of the project;
 - B. The County has implemented (or if the mitigation measure pertains to post-construction activities, the County will implement into the project) the mitigation monitoring and reporting program that is attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 6; and
 - C. The County has designed the project to include the best management practices (BMP) identified by Conservancy staff to address the potential (although insignificant) impacts of greenhouse gas emissions from the project.
3. The County shall implement post-project effectiveness monitoring of the project for five years following construction in accordance with a monitoring plan approved by the Conservancy's Executive Officer."

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

"Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of both Chapter 5.5 and Chapter 6 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code regarding integrated coastal and marine resources protection and coastal resource enhancement projects.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
3. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the Mitigated Negative Declaration adopted by the County of Ventura on November 24, 2009, pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act, for the Ojai Valley Trail San Antonio Creek Bridge project (Exhibit 5). The Conservancy finds that there is no substantial evidence that the project, as mitigated, will have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15382."

PROJECT SUMMARY:

This project would provide funds to enable the County of Ventura's Parks Department to replace a culvert crossing with a bridge along the Ojai Valley Trail at the confluence of San Antonio Creek and the Ventura River.

The primary goals of the project are to improve both passage and instream habitat for endangered southern steelhead and public safety along the trail. By removing an existing four -

barrel culvert and replacing it with a bridge set well above the water surface elevation of the 100-year floodplain, the project would improve steelhead passage to and from 15 miles of blue line streams within the San Antonio Creek watershed. By recontouring the channel and restoring both the natural streambed and natural hydrologic conditions at the confluence, the project would also improve habitat conditions for steelhead and other aquatic species. In addition, the new bridge would provide a low maintenance, all-weather crossing over San Antonio Creek, improving user safety on the Ojai Valley Trail during high flows and minimizing storm-related closures of the trail along this segment.

The Ojai Valley Trail is a popular, regionally important Class 1 bike, equestrian, jogging and pedestrian path that runs along the Ventura River from Soule Park in Ojai to Foster Park in Ventura, where it connects with the six-mile Ventura River Trail to downtown Ventura, the estuary, and the Coastal Trail. Completed in 1989 and managed by the County of Ventura Parks Department, the Ojai Valley Trail was one of the first rails-to-trails projects in Southern California. Today its 9.5 miles provide an important commuting link and recreational facility for residents of and visitors to west Ventura County, as well as one of the most scenic bike rides in the region.

The project site is located at the confluence of San Antonio Creek with the Ventura River, about eight miles above the estuary in unincorporated Ventura County (see Exhibit 2). The culvert crossing consists of a reinforced concrete structure with four passages, each about 2 feet tall and 3 feet wide. The top of the culverts provides the surface for the trail crossing. The trail's approaches to the crossing consist of earthen fill within the streambed on either side of the culverts, with riprap protection of both the upstream and downstream slopes (see Exhibit 4)

The culverts were designed to accommodate low flows and allow higher flows to pass over the top during large flood events. But during winter storms, the culverts often fill with alluvium and debris, causing the trail to flood continuously (see Exhibit 4). In years with heavy rainfall, the crossing has remained closed for months, until flows recede enough to allow the sediment blocking the culverts to be cleared by hand. When the trail is washed out over the crossing, the public often disregards the closed gates and posted signs and crosses the channel while flows are still present, creating a serious public safety issue as well as a potential liability problem for the County.

Removal of the impediments created by the culverts is also critical for steelhead recovery in the Ventura River watershed. The trail crossing is identified as a priority migration barrier in NOAA's Southern California Steelhead Recovery Plan and the Conservancy's inventory of barriers to fish passage in California's coastal watersheds. In 2007 it was listed as the number one barrier-restoration project by the Tri-County FISH Team, a coalition of public agencies and nonprofit organizations in Ventura, Santa Barbara, and San Luis Obispo counties who work together to develop a regional approach to salmonid restoration in the three-county area.

Under the County's plans for the project, the existing culverts would be removed, including the associated foundation and fill. The crossing then would be replaced with a 520-foot bridge supported by an elevated concrete structure consisting of support piers placed at six locations along the span (see Exhibit 3). The overall maximum height of the bridge would be about 22 feet above the San Antonio Creek streambed and 10-12 feet above the existing surface elevation of the trail. The bridge would have a 10 foot-wide deck, with 54 inch-high handrails, and an

overall length of 790 feet, including approach ramps. It would be designed to support pedestrian, bicycle and equestrian traffic, as well occasional lightweight (or golf-cart sized) patrol vehicles. The grade of the approach ramps would be five percent or less to meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Due to the depth of the existing culvert foundations, removal may require diversion of the surface flow of San Antonio Creek and the Ventura River during the construction phase of the project. Other major components of the project would include construction of temporary access ramps of native earth material; removal of vegetation from the work area; excavation of a pilot channel in the Ventura River; installation of the bridge abutments and pier footings; installation of the support piers and bridge segments; construction of the bridge approaches; restoration of stream flow to the pre-construction channel of San Antonio Creek; and restoration of the site with native vegetation. Cut and fill volumes would be balanced onsite.

At the conclusion of the project, the County would install a kiosk at the south approach to the bridge to educate the public about the value of ecosystem management and restoration.

A portion of the Conservancy grant (about \$30,000) may be used to pay for final engineering designs for the project, but the balance of the grant would be used to fund actual construction. The County intends to complete the design, engineering, permitting, and contracting for the project by early summer 2011, with a goal of initiating construction in August and completing it by the end of November 2011.

The County will develop, fund and implement a post-construction monitoring program for the project. Baseline data is available from surveys conducted in 2002, 2003, 2005 and 2007 for various studies and reports, which the County will use in preparing habitat mitigation and monitoring reports for five years following completion of construction.

Site description

The project site comprises about four acres and is located east of Santa Ana Road about eight miles upstream from the estuary and adjacent to the community of Casitas Springs in unincorporated Ventura County (Exhibits 2 and 3). The County owns fee title or easement rights to the entire project site, although it may be required to obtain the consent of an adjacent land owner, the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy, to divert the stream during construction. The project site lies outside the coastal zone but within the Ventura River watershed, an important coastal system that is described in detail below. The work area consists of aquatic and upland wildlife habitat that includes open water, freshwater marsh, riparian scrub, and riparian forest habitats. In the project vicinity, the floodplain is about 500 feet wide, providing cover and foraging habitat for wildlife moving through the area. Listed species that inhabit or transverse the site include southern steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*), California red-legged frog (*Rana aurora draytonii*), and least Bell's vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*).

Water flows perennially along this reach and provides over-summering habitat for one of two existing populations of southern steelhead on the mainstem. While much of the mainstem is comprised of highly dynamic braided channels with sub-surface summer flows, the reach adjacent to the project site contains deep cool pools and sufficient food production to support steelhead even in times of drought. Because of the year-round availability of water and its location at the intersection of the Ventura River and San Antonio Creek, the project area is

heavily used by wildlife. Other special status species besides steelhead regularly move along or inhabit this reach, including arroyo chub, southwestern pond turtle and two-striped garter snake.

The County's project will provide important benefits in the face of climate change because the project will improve the ability of species to migrate or disperse along stream corridors to more favorable habitat as climate conditions change. In addition, the project will help restore important refugia for steelhead. San Antonio Creek and the Ventura River are highly energetic fluvial systems capable of carrying large amounts of sediment and debris, but the proposed bridge will be located well above the elevation of the 100-year floodplain. Replacing the existing culvert crossing with this bridge will allow restoration of the channel to its natural hydrologic condition, reducing vulnerabilities from species loss, flooding, and habitat loss.

Watershed description

The Ventura River watershed encompasses 226 square miles and is 31 miles long from its headwaters in Los Padres National Forest to its outfall into the Pacific (See Exhibit 2). The mainstem, which originates at the confluence of North Fork Matilija Creek and Matilija Creek, is 15.6 miles long. Downstream of that juncture, the river's principal tributaries are San Antonio Creek, Wills Creek, Rice Creek, Coyote Creek and Cañada Larga. At least 26 special status species inhabit or utilize aquatic, riparian and wetland habitats in the watershed, including 13 species listed as threatened or endangered and 13 California species of special concern.

The major issue within the watershed has been the dramatic decline of southern steelhead, a federally listed endangered species. Until the late 1940's, the river essentially ran unimpeded to the ocean, and 4,000 to 5,000 adult steelhead would migrate up the river each year to spawn and rear, creating one of the largest steelhead runs in the state. But in 1948, the Ventura County Flood Control District built Matilija Dam to control flooding and alleviate persistent water supply shortages that had supposedly plagued the watershed since the 1920s. The dam included no fish passage facility and as a consequence cut off access to more than half of the historic steelhead spawning habitat in the watershed.

Matilija Dam is a 198-foot high, 620-foot wide, concrete arch dam located inland of the coastal zone, about 16 miles upstream from the Pacific. It is responsible for a variety of adverse effects on stream ecology and wildlife. The sediment trapped by the dam has deprived downstream reaches of the sand, gravel, and more coarse-grained materials needed to sustain a suitable substrate for fish, such as riffle and pool formations, sandbars, and secondary channels. The dam also blocks flows from the upper watershed and has altered natural stream and habitat dynamics. A broad coalition of local, state, federal, and private agencies (including the Conservancy) have been working for the past decade to study the feasibility of removing Matilija Dam, finalize engineering designs, and secure the funding and congressional support needed to remove the dam and implement a broader ecosystem restoration program for the river. Removal of the dam would restore fish passage to more than 17 miles of historic spawning and rearing habitat in the upper watershed. It would also restore natural sediment transport downstream and improve sand replenishment at beaches along the coast.

San Antonio Creek is downstream of Matilija Dam and provides some of the best remaining habitat for steelhead in the Ventura River watershed. It is the first major tributary to the Ventura River, one of the few remaining systems in Southern California capable of supporting steelhead

spawning and rearing.

Project history

For several decades, the Conservancy has partnered with other agencies and nonprofit organizations to protect, enhance and restore the Ventura River watershed. One focus of the Conservancy's work has been to improve fish passage along the river and its tributaries. Those efforts include over \$8.4 million in Conservancy grants to help fund the evaluation project, dam removal feasibility study, and habitat restoration program for Matilija Dam. The Conservancy also provided a \$1.75 million grant to the Casitas Municipal Water District for the design and construction of a fish ladder at the Robles Diversion, where successful passage by returning adult steelhead through that facility has been documented annually since 2005.

In addition, the Conservancy has also assisted the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy (OVLC) in acquiring key habitat preserves along the river. That funding has included a \$3.1 million grant in 2003 for purchase of the 1,556-acre Farmont Ranch (now known as the Ventura River Preserve); a \$450,000 grant in 2004 to establish the OVLC's 30-acre Confluence Preserve, as well as a \$90,000 grant in 2008 for purchase of the 53-acre Drapeau Property (now called the Rio Vista Preserve). And in January of this year, the Conservancy authorized \$500,000 in funding to the OVLC for the purchase of the 70-acre Hollingsworth Ranch property along the river.

Each of those acquisitions are components of the Ventura River Parkway Program, a multi-phased effort by the Conservancy and its project partners to acquire and restore a contiguous corridor of habitat and recreational open space along the lower 15 miles of the river from Ojai to the estuary. The goal is to create a greenway that would conserve habitat, protect wildlife linkages, manage stormwater, construct trails and interpretive facilities, recharge groundwater, and reconnect the river to its floodplain.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$215,000
Federal Pacific Coast Salmonid Recovery funds (administered under the CA Department of Fish and Game's fisheries restoration grant program)	\$483,200
County of Ventura Parks Enterprise Fund	496,800
Ventura County Transportation Commission	190,000
Channel Islands Bicycle Club	17,000
NOAA Open Rivers Initiative (pending)	190,000
American Rivers Initiative (pending)	75,000
Federal National Fish Passage Program (pending)	150,000
Total project cost	\$1,817,000

The anticipated source of funds for this project is an appropriation to the Conservancy from Proposition 84---the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Public Resources Code Sections 75001 *et seq*). Consistent

with the purposes specified in Section 75060 of that bond act, removal of the fish passage barrier along the Ojai Valley Trail would protect natural habitat values of coastal lands in the Ventura River watershed, as well as promote access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state.

In evaluating projects for the purpose of natural resource protection under Proposition 84, the Conservancy is directed by Section 75071 of the bond act to give priority to projects that meet one or more of the five criteria specified in Section 75071. Removal of the fish passage barrier along the Ojai Valley Trail would meet at least two of those criteria:

1. ‘Projects that contribute to long-term protection of and improvement to the water and biological quality of the streams, aquifers, and terrestrial resources of priority watersheds of the major biological regions of the state. . .’ [§75071(b)]. The removal of the fish passage barrier along the Ojai Valley Trail would help restore critical steelhead passage along the Ventura River and its tributaries, a priority watershed in Southern California.
2. “Properties for which there is a non-state matching contribution toward the acquisition, restoration, stewardship or management costs.” [§75071(e)]. As shown above, over 88 percent of the costs of this project would be funded by federal, county and private funds.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is consistent with both Chapter 5.5 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Section 31220), regarding integrated coastal and marine resources protection, and with Chapter 6 of that legislation (Sections 31251-31270) regarding coastal resource enhancement.

Chapter 5.5: Section 31220(a) of the Public Resources Code authorizes the Conservancy to undertake restoration projects within coastal watersheds if those projects meet one or more of the criteria specified in Section 31220(b). Consistent with §31220(b)(2)(3) and (8), the project will restore fish and wildlife habitat within a coastal watershed, reduce threats to coastal and marine fish species, and provide for public access compatible with resource protection and restoration objectives. The project will modify a major barrier to fish migration in the Ventura River watershed and ensure continuous use of the Ojai Valley Trail by the public in a manner that will be compatible with protection and restoration of the steelhead population in the watershed. Consistent with §31220(a), staff has consulted with the State Water Resources Control Board in the development of the project to ensure consistency with Chapter 3 of Division 20.4 of the Public Resources Code. Consistent with §31220(c), the project conforms to local watershed management plans and the Regional Basin Plan of the Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board (see “Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plan/State Water Quality Control Plan” below), and includes a monitoring and project evaluation component.

Chapter 6: Under §31251 and 31251.2, the Conservancy may award grants to public agencies for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources, including watershed resources that lie partly outside the coastal zone where, due to improper location of improvements or natural or human-induced events, the resource has suffered the loss of natural values. By removing the culvert crossing along the Trail, the proposed project would restore fish passage and instream

habitat for endangered southern steelhead in the Ventura River watershed, and it is therefore consistent with that section. Consistent with §31251.2, , and the project is being undertaken specifically at the request of the local public agency having jurisdiction over the entire project area, and the California Department of Fish and Game has been consulted regarding its design and implementation.

Consistent with Section 31252, the proposed project will address existing problems in one of the special resource areas identified in the Ventura County Local Coastal Program (LCP). Priority policies in the County LCP include protection of biological productivity and quality of coastal waters, streams, wetlands, and estuaries; special protection for species of biological or economic importance; the maintenance of marine resources; and the protection and restoration of riparian areas. The proposed project will address those issues by implementing restoration measures to enhance and restore fish habitat in the coastal-draining Ventura River watershed.

The proposed authorization is consistent with §31253, which states that the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of any coastal resource enhancement project. As discussed in the “Project Financing” section above, the proposed grant from the Conservancy represents less than 12 percent of the total construction costs for the project. In determining the amount of Conservancy funding for this project, the factors identified in §31253 have been considered and applied, as described in detail below under the heading "Consistency with Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines."

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2007 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S)

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective E** the proposed project would reconstruct and upgrade a critical segment of the Ojai Valley Trail, a regionally-important multiuse trail and inland link to the Coastal Trail, increasing and enhancing coastal recreational opportunities for residents of and visitors to west Ventura County.

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective B**, the proposed project would help restore and enhance the stream corridor of San Antonio Creek, a major tributary to the Ventura River.

Consistent with **Goal 6, Objective C**, the proposed project would remove one of the major barriers to fish passage in the Ventura River watershed.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY

The proposed project is consistent with the *Coastal Conservancy Policy Statement on Climate Change*, adopted on June 4, 2009, which recognizes that “protection, restoration, and enhancement of habitats, ecosystem processes, and open space is essential to minimizing threats from global warming to California's biodiversity. . .”. By promoting fish passage and restoring steelhead habitat and landscape linkages along the Ventura River, the proposed project will protect potential migration corridors, promote the survival of listed and other native species and biodiversity, and help preserve key ecosystem processes within the Ventura River watershed.

The Policy Statement on Climate Change also directs Conservancy staff to consider climate

change in evaluating which projects to fund and the manner in which projects are selected. Staff has taken into account the relevant considerations in connection with its proposal to fund this project, as detailed in the discussion in both the “Site Description” section above and in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines” section, below.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on June 4, 2009, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

- 1. Promotion of the Conservancy’s statutory programs and purposes:** See the above discussion on “Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation.”
- 2. Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
- 3. Support from the public:** The project is supported by State Senator Tony Strickland, Assembly member Jeff Gorell, Ventura County Supervisors Steve Bennett and Kathy Long, former assembly member Pedro Nava, and the Ventura River Watershed Council, as well several other community groups in the Ojai and Ventura area. Letters of support are provided in Exhibit 7.
- 4. Location:** Although the proposed project is located outside the Coastal Zone, it would improve a vital inland connector trail to the Coastal Trail and improve passage for anadromous fish that depend on coastal and marine environments. By modifying a major passage barrier, the project would restore access to 15 miles of spawning and rearing habitat for endangered steelhead in the San Antonio Creek watershed.
- 5. Need:** Without the proposed grant from the Conservancy, the County would lack the funds to implement this important project. No other sources are available to fully fund the project and allow it to be constructed this year.
- 6. Greater-than-local interest:** Replacement of the culvert crossing along the Ojai Valley Trail will provide all-weather access and use of a regionally-important multiuse trail and inland link to the Coastal Trail. It will also remove a key barrier to steelhead migration in the Ventura River watershed, a major regional, state and federal priority.
- 7. Vulnerability to sea level rise:** At an elevation of approximately 350 feet above mean sea level and a location eight miles inland from the coast, the project site is outside the area considered vulnerable to future sea level rise by the end of this century.

Additional Criteria

- 8. Urgency:** The Ojai Valley Trail culvert crossing hinders access by endangered southern steelhead to over 15 miles of blue line streams in the San Antonio Creek watershed. Removal of this barrier has been listed as a priority in a number of steelhead recovery and passage improvement plans.

- 9. Resolution of more than one issue:** Implementation of this project will help address issues of watershed and coastal resource protection, habitat protection and restoration, endangered species recovery, and public recreation and access.
- 10. Leverage:** As noted in the “Project Financing” section above, more than 88 percent of the funding for this project would come from county, federal and private sources.
- 11. Innovation.** Implementation of this project will demonstrate how public agencies in Southern California can improve their infrastructure facilities to promote the recovery of endangered steelhead in the region.
- 12. Readiness:** The County has completed all but the final engineering designs for the project and is ready to begin construction by late summer 2011. County Parks and the General Services Agency of the County have demonstrated that they possess the expertise, experience, public support and administrative capability needed to manage and complete this project by the end of the year.
- 13. Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** For over a decade, the Conservancy has been involved in helping improve fish passage along the Ventura River, as well as helping conserve and restore the Ventura River watershed. In addition to its considerable investment in the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Program, the Conservancy has helped fund construction of the fish ladder at the Robles Diversion and has helped lead the development and implementation of a river parkway program for the Ventura River.
- 14. Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The proposed project will help reduce automobile travel in west Ventura County by helping reduce storm-related closures of the Ojai Valley Trail, a Class 1 bike path. As discussed in the section on “Compliance with CEQA” below, the County will implement various best management practices to reduce the temporary greenhouse gas emissions that may be generated by equipment and vehicular trips during construction.
- 15. Vulnerability from climate impacts other than sea level rise:** As noted in the “Site Description” section above, the project will improve the ability of species to migrate or disperse along San Antonio Creek and the Ventura River to more favorable habitat as climate conditions change.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The project is consistent with the Ventura County Local Coastal Program, which requires the County of Ventura to “work in close cooperation with other agencies and jurisdictions to provide comprehensive and biologically sound management of coastal wetlands.” The project will have positive impacts on the biological productivity of the Ventura River, including the special-status anadromous species that inhabit the wetlands at and near the estuary. It is also consistent with the objective in the County’s LCP “to protect wetlands. . .and encourage their. . .restoration and enhancement by the State to perpetuate their value to onshore and nearshore coastal life. . .”.

The proposed project is consistent with the policy goals of the certified Local Coastal Program (LCP) of the City of San Buenaventura (the City of Ventura), as amended in 1990. The City’s LCP includes policies which emphasize protection of the natural attributes and wildlife of the Ventura River (3.1), protection of sensitive wetland and riparian habitat areas (e.g., policies 12.1,

12.4 and 12.6), and both the preservation of the Ventura River in its existing semi-natural state and its restoration to natural conditions (Policy 13.1).

The project would also help meet several major regional goals in the Regional Strategy of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project. The project would promote at least four of the six Regional Goals of the Wetlands Recovery Project: restoring stream corridors in coastal watersheds, recovering native habitat and species diversity; integrating wetlands recovery with other public objectives; and promoting public access and education related to coastal watersheds.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN/ STATE WATER QUALITY CONTROL PLAN:

The proposed project is consistent with the objectives and strategies for the Ventura River watershed in the Integrated Regional Watershed Management Plan (IRWMP) of the Watersheds Coalition of Ventura County (2006). The project includes sustaining, protecting and restoring ecosystem functions in the watershed by protecting and restoring viable ecosystems and restoring habitat connectivity. In addition, one of the principal regional priorities for the Ventura River watershed in the IRWMP is the removal of fish passage barriers.

Removal of the fish passage barrier along the Ojai Valley Trail is also consistent with the Los Angeles RWQCB's Basin Plan for the Coastal Watersheds of Los Angeles and Ventura Counties (1994). The regional objectives for wetlands in that Basin Plan mandate (a) protection of natural hydrologic conditions necessary to prevent significant adverse effects on aquatic flora and fauna; and (b) preservation of existing habitats and associated populations of wetland flora and fauna, including the protection of wildlife corridors and natural substrate characteristics to support flora and fauna.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Mitigated Negative Declaration

To comply with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the County of Ventura's General Services Agency, as lead agency, prepared an Initial Study and Mitigated Negative Declaration to evaluate the potential environmental impacts from the Ojai Valley Trail San Antonio Creek Bridge project. The Mitigated Negative Declaration (attached as Exhibit 5) was noticed and circulated for public review in the summer of 2009, and after receipt and response to public comments, was approved and adopted by the County on November 24, 2009.

The Initial Study and Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND) identified eight areas of potentially significant impacts: air quality, water quality, hydraulic hazards, hazardous materials, biological resources, archeological and other cultural resources, noise, and transportation facilities. The MND analyzed and adopted mitigated measures to ensure that these potential impacts are avoided or reduced to less than significant levels:

Air quality: Dust and exhaust emissions could be produced by heavy equipment and vehicles during construction of the project. Because of their temporary, short-term nature, the

construction emissions of reactive organic compounds and nitrogen oxides are not subject to the quantitative thresholds of the Ventura County Air Pollution Control District (APCD) and as a result would not be subject to reduction emissions. In addition, the project would only make a small, short-term contribution to existing particulate-matter emissions from diesel exhaust, and those impacts are considered to be less than significant.

The APCD does, however, require that emission reduction measures be implemented during construction to reduce fugitive dust generation. The MND specifies a series of air emission reduction measures to control dust based upon best management practices (BMPs) recommended by the APCD. They include minimizing disturbed areas to prevent excessive dust generation; watering areas before beginning grading or excavation; treating graded and exposed areas of the construction site with periodic watering or soil stabilization materials; limiting construction traffic to 15 mph; suspending grading and excavation work during high winds; sweeping adjacent streets to prevent soil material from accumulating; enclosing, covering or stabilizing material stockpiles; and conducting all construction and site preparation operations in compliance with applicable APCD rules and regulations.

Water quality, hydraulic hazards and hazardous materials: Inadvertent spills of fuel or lubricants during project construction could percolate into the aquifer and adversely affect groundwater quality. Stream diversion and the use of heavy equipment within San Antonio Creek and the Ventura River could result in temporary increases in turbidity. And inadvertent spills of fuels and lubricants during construction could also enter surface waters when the temporary stream diversion is removed. As a result, the MND specifies that a Storm Water Quality Pollution Prevention Plan be prepared to implement a monitoring program and a number of BMPs to prevent spills and minimize erosion and sediment transport from the construction site.

Biological resources: Temporary diversion of stream flow from the current channel during construction could strand steelhead and red-legged frog (both listed species). In addition, construction activities within or adjacent to the stream could adversely affect each of those species. Vegetation clearing required for project construction could adversely affect foraging and breeding by least Bell's vireo, another listed species that might inhabit the project area. The MND incorporates measures to prevent significant impacts to those listed species and their habitats. They include limiting construction to the dry season; developing and implementing a mitigation and monitoring plan to replace oak trees, wetlands, aquatic and riparian habitat; employing a biologist to monitor construction activities and flow diversion and survey the project area for listed species; relocating (under appropriate guidance from regulatory agencies) steelhead or red-legged frog found in the work area during construction; precluding impacts to active least Bell's vireo nests; and diverting flows in San Antonio Creek and the Ventura River to minimize the use of heavy equipment in active stream channels.

The proposed project would also result in the temporary loss of a quarter acre of wetlands within the construction work area, which is considered a potentially significant impact. This impact would be reduced to less than significant through revegetation of the work area with native riparian species, which would result in an increase in the quality of the wetlands. Finally, the project could have potentially significant impacts on locally-important species and communities. They include the loss of two large coast live oaks; potential impacts to habitat for arroyo chub, southwestern pond turtle, two-striped garter snake, Cooper's hawk, yellow warbler, and yellow-

breasted chat; and the removal of four-tenths of an acre of riparian forest. In addition to the mitigation measures specified above, other measures specified by the MND would reduce those impacts to less than significant levels: biological surveys to assess the presence of special-status wildlife species and requirements to suspend or re-direct work (and in some cases relocate species) if those species are found in the project area.

Archeological resources: Although neither the Phase I cultural resources investigation or a field survey identified any archeological resources within the project area, the project could potentially impact unreported cultural resources discovered during project-related excavation. As mitigation measures, the MND specifies that if archeological resources are found, work will be temporarily suspended or redirected until an archeologist has evaluated the nature and significance of the find. If human remains are unearthed, no further disturbance shall occur until the County Coroner has made the necessary determinations required by state law.

Noise: Construction equipment and pile driving will generate high intermittent noise levels, but noise generation will be occasional during the three-to-four month construction period and will occur only during daytime hours. Impacts will be reduced to less than significant levels by requiring exhaust silencers and engine covers on all trucks and equipment and notifying adjacent residents of the construction schedule and periods of anticipated high noise levels, such as those caused by pile driving.

Transportation facilities: The Ojai Valley Trail is a regionally important Class 1 bike trail, which also accommodates pedestrian and equestrian use. Construction of the proposed bridge would require temporary closure of the Trail during the 3-4 month construction period. The temporary impacts from such closure can be reduced to less-than-significant levels by the installation of signs around the project work area warning users about bridge construction and by the creation of a detour around the bridge work area.

Greenhouse gas emissions and climate change

The MND found that although construction of the project could potentially generate greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, determination of the project's impact on resources of concern would be speculative because no thresholds of significance had yet been adopted. Following the approval and adoption of the MND by the County in 2009, however, the California Natural Resources Agency issued new CEQA Guidelines to guide the assessment of environmental impacts of greenhouse gas emissions in projects subject to CEQA. In particular, 14 California Code of Regulations (CCR) Section 15064.4 provides guidance regarding possible methodologies as well as particular factors which an agency should use to describe, calculate or estimate the amount of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions resulting from a particular project. In accordance with this guidance, Conservancy staff has qualitatively analyzed the project to assess the significance of the GHG emissions that would be generated by its implementation and has concluded that this impact will be less than significant. This analysis does not require the preparation of a supplemental environmental document because the analysis does not reveal the presence of new significant effects nor trigger any of the other standards specified in 14 CCR Section 15162.

The Conservancy staff assessment of the project's impact from GHG emissions is based on the following facts. The project may emit some quantity of greenhouse gases during its construction, but will not require the use of electricity or otherwise emit GHG emissions once it

is completed. The project's GHG emissions will result only from construction equipment, the lifecycle emissions of construction materials, and the vehicle miles traveled for construction purposes. The project incorporates a variety of best management practices to reduce these impacts:

(1) The County shall give preference to contractors that maximize fuel efficiency by using engines on construction equipment that are no more than ten years old or have equivalent carbon dioxide emissions of an engine ten years old or newer.

(2) The County shall encourage engine electrification for off-road vehicles or other equipment used by its contractors on the project.

(3) The County shall include a construction and demolition (C&D) plan that will result in at least 50 percent diversion of C&D waste through reuse of non-hazardous construction waste from disposal; and

(4) The County shall haul building or construction materials that are not recyclable or reusable for another project to the nearest waste disposal facility or C&D recycling facility rather than transporting such materials out of the area.

Finally, one of the primary objectives of the project is to provide an all-weather bicycle trail between Ojai and Ventura and thus promote an overall reduction in vehicle miles traveled in the region. In summary, the project does not have the potential to contribute to a significant project-specific or cumulative impact from GHG emissions.

Upon independent review of the MND and the project's possible GHG impacts, Conservancy staff concurs with the analysis by the County that the proposed project, as mitigated, will not have a significant adverse effect on the environment. Following Conservancy approval of the proposed authorization, staff will file a Notice of Determination for this project.